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Writing Los Angeles: A Literary Anthology
edited by David L. Ulin
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Reviewed by **James Clapp**

When many years ago my grad school classmates learned I had congratulations were tempered with oblique insinuations that my chosen life of scholarship would plunge faster than a California sunset. It was the late sixties, and I had opted for the land of the lotus-eaters, John Birchers, naked hot tub encounter groups, Disneyland, and Tinseltown. I was decamping for the intellectual wasteland of fantasy, hedonism, and ritual self-reinvention. In no time at all my brain would be flotsam in the surf, putrefying like some hapless Portuguese man-of-war on a beach where surfers wait mindlessly for "the perfect wave."

It is close to a habit of mind for U.S. eastcoasters to "rag" on California this way. (Oregon and Washington hardly count; the West Coast is California). According to Neil Simon: "When it's 105 degrees in New York City, it's 78 degrees in LA. When it's 20 degrees below in New York City, it's 78 degrees in LA. Of course, there are 11 million interesting people in New York City, and 78 in LA."

That's a New Yorker's hyperbole, of course, but now there is documentation for Simon's number. There are, or have been, at least 77 interesting people in Los Angeles and, if one counts the editor and compiler of *Writing Los Angeles: A Literary Anthology*, that makes 78. The seventy-seven are the authors that David Ulin has brought together for this thick compendium of observations about a city that is often, if unfairly, derided for being a cultural wasteland and an urban disaster. It could have been much thicker, however, Ulin admits in his introduction; many significant authors who have written about or set their accepted a professorship at a southern California university, their narratives in Los Angeles had to be left out to allow him the latitude to provide selections that would address the city's foundations, growth, architecture, development and expansion, economic base, natural setting, and of course, its relationship to Hollywood, the film industry, and the myths and renown that have issued forth from that relationship. Still, the selection of novel excerpts and essays is evidence that Los Angeles, far from being a place in which, in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*, the prime cultural contribution is "being able to make a right turn on a red light," is actually a place writers have found to be a locus and inspiration for a far broader range of urban experience.

Ulin leaves that literary archeology to be uncovered without benefit of a layer of organization that places the selected works under specific topics, instead employing only the original titles of works or chapters, and the promises of the prose of Jack Kerouac, Tennessee Williams, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Vachel Lindsey, Aldous Huxley, William Faulkner, Joan Didion, John Rechy, Jan Morris, Octavio Paz, Tom Wolfe, and some less luminous names, to browse among, in what is most likely to serve as a browser's compendium.

Situated on America's *finis terre* Los Angeles tends to be regarded as a young city, perhaps because most if its growth is relatively recent. Between 1906 and 1926, it grew in area from twenty-six square miles to over four-hundred square miles. But its foundation dates from five years after the Declaration of Independence as a pueblo named *Nuestra Señora Riena de los Angeles*, as Helen

Hunt Jackson records its early days in her *Echoes in the City of Los Angeles.*

For a time Los Angeles served as a tourist location, but its significant residential growth is owed to two factors: the relocation of the movie industry from the East Coast, partly as a result of the weather that allowed shooting the year round, and partly to escape motion picture patents of the Edison company; the other was the relocation of Owens River Valley water to the San Fernando Valley some two hundred miles away. The movie industry, rhapsodized as the "Boston of the Photoplay" by Vachel Lindsay in a chapter from *The Art of the Moving Picture*, brought a rich assortment of people not just to the colony of Hollywood, but established a new culture. Likened to a gold rush for artistic people, Hollywood attracted thousands of writers, actors, directors, and technicians, many of whom were immigrants and ex-patriots from Nazi Germany. Along with Christopher Isherwood, whose 1939 diary entries are among the contributions, by the 1940s Arnold Schoenberg, Aldous Huxley, screenwriters Bertold and Salka Viertel, and Thomas Mann were in the Southern California community. Los Angeles, if unappreciated for its urban aesthetics by some, offered an openness and freedom from the conventions of the East. Isherwood began his May 1939 entry with: "Toward evening we came into downtown Los Angeles—perhaps the ugliest city on earth. It was Saturday night, and the streets were swarming with drunks. We saw three sailors carrying a girl into a house, as though they were going to eat her alive. From the hotel, we telephoned Chris Wood. 'How wonderful,' he said, 'to hear an effeminate British voice!'"

For those who chose not to be so forthcoming, Los Angeles was a ready place for self-reinvention. Not only film actors adopted new names and fictionalized identities, but in some way, the trip over or through the Rockies, severed connections with the travelers' pasts. As such, and with some justification, Los Angeles, and Southern California in general, acquired a reputation for insincerity, a land for "fruits and nuts," flim-flam artists, and grand illusions. The land was not only fertile for orange and flower groves, and *"Oil!"* as Upton Sinclair's contribution reminds us, but also for soul snatching. Critical minds like that of H.L. Mencken saw Los Angeles as a place where, in contradistinction to the lyric about New York that "if you can make it there you can make it anywhere," anyone might "make it." He reported on evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson:

> What brought this commonplace and transparent mountebank to her present high estate, with thousands crowding to her tabernacle daily and money flowing in upon her from whole regiments of eager dupes? The answer, it seems to me, is as plain as mud. For years she had been wandering about the West, first as a sideshow wriggler, then as a faith healer, and finally as a cow-town evangelist. One day, inspired by God, she decided to try her

> fortune in Los Angeles. Instantly she was a roaring success. And Why? For the plain reason that there are more morons collected in Los Angeles than in any other place on earth—because it was a pasture foreordained for evangelists, and she was the first comer to give it anything low enough for its taste and comprehension.

Mencken was charitable enough not to mention her predecessor Spanish friars. In addition there was a secular side to Los Angeles evangelism, as many writers have noted the unabashed and unrestrained boosterism of its abundant promoters and profiteers, about which screenwriter Robert Town's "*Preface and Postscript to* Chinatown" is noteworthy.

Like a social Petri dish warmed by sun from the only semi-arid Mediterranean microclimate in the country, other cultural forms spring to life. Tom Wolfe wrote about the emergence of the car cult for which the state became famous in *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*. The original *Disneyland*, which opened in 1955, inspired Umberto Eco who called it a *City of Robots*. Multi-cultured travel writer-novelist Pico Iyer sees the terminals of LAX International Airport as a portal *Where Worlds Collide*. "They come out, blinking, into the bleached, forgetful sunshine, in Dodgers caps and Rodeo Drive T-shirts, with maps their cousins have drawn for them and images they've brought over from *Cops* and *Terminator 2*; they come out, dazed, disoriented, heads still partly in the clouds, bodies still several time zones—or centuries—away, and they step into the Promised Land."

Finally, there is Los Angeles' urbanism, which at times seems to have spilled out of Hollywood's soundstages onto palm-lined wide streets ending in sunsets, a myriad of residential architectural styles competing for attention like chorines at a cattle call. Few commentators have found much to praise in Los Angeles' urbanscape of sprawling subdivisions, malls, and parking lots, where the Bosnia Herzegovina neighborhoods of East Los Angeles echo in the night with drive-by gunfire, and commercial architecture seems to owe its pedigree to a ménage of Disneyland and the back lot at Universal. Joan Didion wrote that, "A good part of any day in Los Angeles is spent driving, alone, through streets devoid of meaning to the driver, which is one reason the place exhilarates some people,. and floods others with amorphous unease."

Among the "exhilarated" can be counted British architect Renyner Banham (the contributions by Cees Nooteboom and John McPhee might also share it in their own fashions), whose *Architecture of the Four Ecologies* finds its architecture consonant with and expressive of a place inincessant re-invention, and the way that "fantasy can lord it over function in Southern California."

As with this review, there is much to Los Angeles that must be left to further exploration, a place that no single phrase seems apt to capture. But if the sprawling reaches of metropolitan Los Angeles seem daunting, the pages of *Writing Los Angeles* are good place to continue the search.